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The 2011 Turkish elections and the prospects for Turkey-EU relations

Firat Cengiz, 29th June 2011

Subjects:

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Turkey's recent elections have created a more open-minded parliament. For the country's future to reflect this change, both sceptical EU member states and the new Turkish government must focus on renewing the process of Turkish accession to the EU, considering the country's economic and regional political weight and the growing number of Turks that reject future EU membership.

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The Turkish Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*; hereafter AKP) has just won the third consecutive parliamentary elections in Turkey with an impressive 49.9% of the vote. The party, led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, initially came to power in 2002 with a pro-European agenda and was able to count on active support by liberals and intellectuals both in Turkey and [abroad](#) [3]. Yet, its nine years in office have led to the need for a re-evaluation of the party's political agenda – particular its impact on Turkish-EU relations.

Background

No other candidate country had a longer and more intricate relationship with the EU than Turkey. It was in 1959 that Turkey applied for associate membership to the European Economic Community (EEC). In 1963 the Ankara Agreement was signed to pave the way for a Customs Union between Turkey and the then-EEC; but no substantial achievements were made until 1995 when the Customs Union was finally created. In the meantime, Turkey had applied for full membership in 1987; yet, only in 1997 the European Council confirmed that Turkey was eligible to become a full EU member. It took another eight years until the accession negotiations officially started and today eight accession negotiation chapters have been opened – though only one was provisionally closed (Science and Research) due to the [conflict](#) [4] on the application of customs union rules by Turkey to Cyprus. Although the first AKP government paved the way for the opening of accession negotiations in 2005, only three years after, the Commission's 2008 [Progress Report](#) [5] on Turkey stated that the (then newly re-elected) AKP government 'did not put forward a consistent and comprehensive programme of political and constitutional reforms.' Similarly, the report pointed out that 'the lack of dialogue and spirit of compromise between the main political parties had a negative impact on the smooth functioning of the political institutions.' The same criticism was restated in the 2010 [Progress Report](#) [6].

Meanwhile, Turkish enthusiasm for EU membership has significantly decreased. The 2004 Autumn [Eurobarometer](#) [7] showed 62% of the country looking favourably towards EU membership with only 20% opposing it. In contrast, the latest Eurobarometer data (Autumn 2010) revealed that only 42% believe EU membership would be a good thing, 32% believe it would be a bad thing and the remaining interviewees had either no opinion or thought membership would be neither good nor bad.

Election Campaigns



Whereas Turkish EU membership and the implicated legal, political and social reform progress had long been a dominant electoral campaign issue, the latest election focused, for the first time almost exclusively on internal Turkish issues - Europe remained very much in the background for all the relevant parties. In the governing AKP's 2011 election manifesto only 2 pages (of a total of 160) were dedicated to Turkish relations with the EU. Here the AKP promised to continue to pursue the objective of EU membership while voicing disappointment and criticising the EU for breaching its own principles particularly by not being impartial in the Cyprus issue and refusing to close chapters in Turkey's accession negotiations. Thus, the AKP did not present any strategy to overcome the current stalemate of Turkey-EU relations. Rather, the party focused on domestic issues, specifically on its goal of achieving a two-third parliamentary majority required for a unilateral constitutional amendment.

Similar observations could be made for the three parliamentary opposition parties: the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; hereafter CHP) entered the 2011 election with a new leadership that was voted into place just over a year before the elections. The party decided to campaign on social injustice and increasing state corruption and offered a 'family insurance' as a solution to extreme poverty. The party's new leadership prepared a potentially attractive list of candidates including pro-EU names. Likewise, under the new leadership the party rid itself from the previous leadership's fundamentally anti-EU attitude. Nevertheless, still, the party's election campaign was dominated by internal economic and social policy issues with minimum role for the EU.

The same was true for the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi; hereafter BDP) whose known policy goals include autonomous local governance and improved minority protection. BDP is generally known to have a positive opinion on the EU, since the EU has been the main catalyst in the improvement of minority rights in Turkey. Nevertheless, in the context of this last elections, in contrast to previous elections, the BDP did not make any specific reference to the EU.

What was maybe most striking in the run-up to the election was the position of the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*; hereafter MHP). The party was busy with internal damage control, as its leadership was subject to a serious overhaul due to a sex scandal shortly before the elections. Due to this scandal, the MHP was expected to fall below the 10% national threshold required to enter the Turkish Parliament. Considering the shift in public opinion on EU membership it could have been expected that a nationalist party would campaign on an anti-EU ticket or at least on a Eurosceptic one. This pattern was observable, e.g. in the [Czech Republic](#), [Slovakia](#) [8] and [Poland](#) [9] where right-wing parties gained significant support by cashing in on raising negative sentiments vis-à-vis the European Union. Nevertheless, like other major political parties, the MHP did not make a specific reference to the EU in its campaign, even in a negative tone.

Results

As is often the case, all four parties announced that they see the results as a success. The AKP was able to win the largest share of the vote of any incumbent government party in the history of Turkey with 49.9%. However, due to the increased votes for both the CHP and BDP, the AKP lost some seats and now is represented with 327 members in the 550-seat Parliament. The CHP won 25.9% of the vote and gained 23 seats, thus, has now 135 MPs. Although they fell far short of challenging the AKP for power, their improved result will give them hope to compete on a more equal footing in five years time. The nationalist MHP managed to pass the 10%-threshold and thereby prevented the AKP from obtaining its desired two-third majority required for a unilateral constitutional amendment. The support for the right-wing party fell, however, by 1 percentage point and it will now be represented by 53 MPs (down from 72).

Due to the 10% national threshold, the Kurdish BDP was forced to field 'independent' candidates rather than run a cohesive party list. This tactic paid off and the party has now elected 35 MPs (up from 27). However, several of the party's independent candidates had been arrested under the KCK



operations, though only one was convicted. Turkish criminal courts have refused to release two BDP MPs arrested under the [KCK operations](#) [10] as well as two CHP MPs arrested under the [Ergenekon investigation](#) [11]. As a response, the entire group of BDP MPs has announced that they will [boycott](#) [12] the Parliament until all their members are allowed to take – what they perceive to be – their rightful seat in the assembly. The CHP's final take on this issue is yet to be declared.

Outlook

Once the controversy over arrested politicians is settled, one can expect that the political focus in Turkey will turn to constitutional reform. The governing AKP has yet to announce its concrete plans on the outlook of a future, new Turkish constitution. So far it has only asked its voters to provide it with a large enough majority to implement a constitutional reform unilaterally – which did not materialise in the end. Although Recep Tayyip Erdoğan promised to seek compromise with other political parties in his customary victory speech, that did not convince those familiar with the Turkish political discourse. In 2010, the AKP government introduced several constitutional amendments singlehandedly through a public referendum. Evidence suggests that the civil society and opposition were marginalised particularly during the discussion phase of that reform process. Currently, AKP is short of only three votes to reach the three-fifth majority required to follow the same strategy and to introduce constitutional amendments through referendum. The strong political desire for a unilateral constitutional amendment as well as serious challenges facing the freedom of expression has led to strong criticism of the government's constitutional objectives in the [international press](#) [13]. These are underlined by the fact that the Prime Minister himself declared in a TV interview on 5 June 2011 that there should be clear limits to the freedom of expression within Turkey. Likewise, sad [statistics](#) [14] show that the journalists under arrest in Turkey outnumber those in any other country in the world.

With regards to the EU, we should recall that during the past few years Turks had to look on as citizens from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina (both in 2009) as well as FYR Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia (all in 2010) joined citizens *inter alia* from Argentina, Honduras and Malaysia to be given visa-free travel rights throughout the EU's Schengen area. In contrast, Turkish citizens have to face significant bureaucratic hurdles to travel to the Union, since they share the strictest category for visa requirements with citizens of, e.g. Qatar, Uganda and Nigeria. Naturally, such a draconian visa policy impacts negatively the Turkish public opinion on the EU, particularly since free travel remains the single largest advantage of EU membership for its citizens (see [Eurobarometer](#) [7]). The fact that there are large Turkish communities settled in many EU Member States makes the bureaucratic hurdles to family re-union even more bothersome.

The EU's fear of opening its borders to travellers from Turkey appears astonishing given Turkey's position as the world's 17th largest economy. Turkey's annual growth for 2010 was 8.9% and its economy is forecast to grow 6.1% and 5.5% in 2011 and 2012 respectively. These figures are not only well above the EU-average but in fact considerably outperform every single EU member state (see [Eurostat](#) [15]). Although the 1995 EU-Turkey Customs Union has contributed to this economic surge, it is the result of an overall impressive economic performance that has some led to call Turkey the '[China of Europe](#)' [16]. Naturally, it is very difficult for the public to disentangle the positive economic effects of EU-Turkey relations from other economic forces at work. The restrictions on travel, in contrast, represent an issue that Turkish citizens directly face in their individual daily lives. The negative treatment of Turkish citizens in this respect results in the emergence of a strong public belief that they are discriminated on the basis of religion.

The need for Europe to pay much greater attention to Turkey's domestic reform agenda as well as the imperative to keep the accession negotiations open has become even more obvious a week after the elections. The Turkish EU Ambassador Selim Kuneralp stated in an [interview](#) [17] that 'in the absence of any clear perspective of accession, there's no reason why Turkey should align its legislation toward narrow EU standards.' He further added that 'the EU has lost its leverage on Turkey'.

Concluding Remarks



The new Turkish parliament comprises many first-time parliamentarians who do not live up to the characteristics of conventional Turkish politicians. Rather, they represent a new open-mindedness and versatility that might bode for Turkey and its political future. Moreover, the parliament now has the largest number of female MPs ever in Turkish history adding further to its diversity. We can only hope that this increased heterogeneity will result in a strong opposition in the Parliament that will fight to keep the EU question in the agenda. (Of course, for this hope to become reality, first the drama surrounding the arrested MPs should be resolved, so that the Parliament can convene).

The prospect of Turkish EU membership raises difficult questions that go far beyond the much-debated religious conundrum. However, maintaining membership as a long-term goal must be in the best interest of both sides – not least for reasons of geopolitical and economic stability. For instance, a structured [EU-Turkey cooperation](#) [18] under the Union's neighbourhood policy to promote the democratic movements in the Middle East would be beneficial to all parties. Yet, the current unsupportive political climate, especially among the many conservative EU governments (and in Turkey itself), brings into question the commitment of the member states, Turkey and the EU institutions to strengthen their political, economic and social cooperation. We argue that, following the results of the recent elections, the EU should focus on partnership strategies that aim to reverse the recent trend of rapidly dropping support for EU membership among the Turkish population. For instance, a concession on the current visa restrictions would go a very long way in rekindling the Turkish faith in the Union's commitment to serious and sustained relations. Moreover, the EU institutions should work closely with Turkish civil society, particularly if the AKP's announced constitutional reform does not show a clear commitment to improving democracy and the rule of law.



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